

Paul Bond reviews *Ratcatcher* —a film by Lynne Ramsay

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Ratcatcher is the debut feature film from Scottish director Lynne Ramsay. Set in a Glasgow tenement block in the 1970s, against a backdrop of rubbish accumulating during a dustbinmen's strike, the film follows a young boy, James, through a series of more or less connected episodes. The film is not shot from a child's point of view, but it is suffused with a child's vision of the world.

The film opens with a beautifully arresting image. A child spins around, twisting himself further and further into a pair of net curtains. With its grainy film quality and muted grey colours, the image establishes an elegiac note that is to be sounded throughout the film. As the titles finish the mood changes just as abruptly. His mother's hand slaps the boy to a sudden halt and she berates him for what he has done to her curtains. This note of deflation is used extensively throughout the film.

We see a child, Brian Quinn, being dressed to go out by his mother. He does not want to go and see his father. Instead, having seen James through the window, he runs off to join him at the canal. James, with an older child's callous humour, pushes Brian into the canal. Brian throws clots of mud at him. James pushes him back into the water and then, somehow, Brian is face down in the canal, dead. James runs back up to the flat. His mother looks through the window and sees Brian's lifeless body on the bank. She hugs James close to her.

Although everything in the film is dependent on this scene and bound up with this moment, the narrative does not unfold mechanically from this point. Instead the film introduces us to James's small circle of acquaintances, and we see him trying to establish contact with them. There is Margaret-Ann, the passive object of sexual exploration to the older boys in the tenements. There is Kenny, James's neighbour, who loves animals, but does not seem to understand that they are living things. There is the rest of James's family—his “Ma and Da,” and his two sisters. His Da drinks and fights and stays out nights. The family's flat is too small for the five of them, and

James yearns to live in a half-built council house that he finds outside the city centre, on the edge of a wheat-field.

Ramsay maintains constant visual elements. The canal and the piles of black dustbin bags seem to occupy every frame. To some extent, they represent the pressures on James as he confronts what he has done in his own limited understanding of it. What is more interesting, though, is that Ramsay represents the death of Brian as a blameless event. James certainly causes it, but he is neither capable of comprehending exactly what he did nor of accepting an informed burden of guilt for his actions. Instead the weight on James is incoherent, childish.

This is perhaps the most striking and powerful feature of the film. In a society that convicts and sentences children as adults, it is no wonder that *Ratcatcher* has come under fire from some quarters. What we experience, thanks in great part to an absolutely stunning performance by William Eadie as James, is a portrayal of a child in a world set adrift, a child who is forced by circumstances to be more adult than he really is.

It is Ramsay's great achievement that just when we have been lulled into accepting James as an adult, she finds a way of showing us how far that is from the truth. When James manages to take a bus out of town to the half-finished housing estate, we see him playing in the builders' sand. When he enters a house there, it is out of curiosity rather than anything more sinister. (Later in the film, when the estate is finished, James finds himself locked out of the house in which he had played before. He shows no sign of wanting to break in—it is just another place that has been denied him). One of the most beautiful scenes in the film, because it is the most truthful, is of James inside the half-made house. He urinates into a toilet basin that has not yet been plumbed in; he is doing the right thing, even as the urine seeps out of the bottom of the toilet.

Ramsay is less successful in her portrayal of the society that stands behind these children, which makes them what

they are. When Kenny falls into the canal attempting to net a perch, his mother runs to Da. Awakened from a drunken sleep Da rescues him just in time. Later, after receiving an award for his bravery (which of course becomes a taunt against James, “Your Da’s a hero!”), he gets drunk. In the most contrived scene in the film, he agrees to hold a small girl’s cat for her while she buys an ice-cream. He stands among the dustbin bags drunkenly petting the cat. A gang of hardmen taunt him, razors are drawn, and he is slashed across the face. (It seems almost churlish to mention it, but in a film that is so dependent on its painterly images, the fast cut between Da being slashed and the raspberry sauce being dripped onto the girl’s ice-cream is the only false image in the film). Da, who is no angel, gets into trouble when he does something kind.

There are similarities here with Ramsay’s portrayal of the children. Ramsay is clearly striving for a poetic representation of the social conditions which have created this environment: the danger is that she ends up seeing people only as the victims of those conditions, and also that she is half in love with the images of what she hates.

Nonetheless, in her representation of children whose lives are blighted by the world they live in, Ramsay has created some magnificent images. Her portrayal of the manner in which that same world reduces adults to the level of children seems less successful because it is less under control. In a recent interview she said, “I don’t want to be obsessed by politics or social-realism, which is really limiting. It’s a lazy eye that sees a film like that.” She has gone some way towards exploring the preoccupations of social realism in a much more imaginative way.

This is strikingly confirmed in *Ratcatcher* in the following fashion: the images of black dustbin bags are a much more powerful expression of social conditions than the almost perfunctorily realistic treatment of the ending of the strike, when the army is sent into the tenements to clear the refuse away. There is a brief interlude of social realism, as television news broadcasts hail the ending of the strike and a man shouts “scabs!” at the army. Much more potent an image, though, is that of the gangs of children beating the bags for rats, showing each other the bodies of the dead animals.

Yet this poses questions of its own. Ramsay draws attention to prevailing social conditions being in some way the determinant of people’s behaviour. What does she want to do with that idea? Her image making is striking and powerful, although occasionally it gets out of her

grip. (The scene in which Kenny’s mouse, breaking through the atmosphere, floats to the moon, and then appears on television with hundreds of other white mice on the moon’s surface, is the closest it comes to slipping away from her completely. She rescues that scene with wit, but it is touch-and-go). At the moment the danger is that she could be more interested in the image than in what underlies it.

There is also the problem of how she regards those social conditions. In the interview cited before she said, “We wanted to do something that was quite timeless. A lot of 70s-set films are about nostalgia and it becomes really kitsch, like a fashion. So we tried not to do that.” She has certainly succeeded in not making a nostalgia-chic piece, but that does not then explain what she sees in that period to interest her. What is it about the specific conditions that drew her eye? It seems that when she is specific about the period (the “Old Firm” football match between Glasgow Rangers and Celtic, the children’s programmes on television, the end of the dustbin men’s strike) she is least successful within. Occasionally she gets drawn into an image that seems unnecessary, or weak in the light of what has gone before. (When James has played in the half-built house the first time he is then drawn to the field of wheat outside. Although well shot it has nowhere near the power and resonance of his behaviour in the house.)

Ratcatcher marks a fascinating debut. Ramsay is a filmmaker with a fine eye for picture quality, and an interest in imagery that is pleasingly at odds with the majority of other young British filmmakers. She is refreshingly not in thrall to Tarantino. If the film seems overlong and disjointed, this is in part due to its episodic nature and in part because of some of the problems I have referred to. If the film as a whole is not greater than the sum of its parts, it is well worth seeing for the strength of some of its parts.

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